

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE CASE

The Experiences of M. F. Goron, Ex-Chief of the Paris Detective Police

Edited by Albert Keyser

A QUEER COUPLE

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FIRST made the acquaintance of Hortense and Robert Perrichon while I was still police commissary in the Pantin district. A Scotland Yard official happened to be in my office when they were ushered in, and at the sight of them he leaned back in his chair convulsed with laughter.

"What's the fun?" I asked. "Why," he roared, "it's Sally and Sampson Brass come to life!" I had not read Dickens, and therefore did not understand the allusion. But when after his return to London my English colleague sent me an illustrated copy of "The Old Curiosity Shop," I appreciated the joke. Like Dickens's famous but unscrupulous characters, the Perrichons were red-haired, tall and scrawny-skinned, and curiously like each other, the resemblance being all the more striking because the woman wore her hair short. Hortense was christened Sally, a name that stuck to her.

The father of Hortense and Robert kept a "reach-me-down" shop in the Rue Faubourg-du-Temple, and had several times been convicted of dealing in stolen goods. After his death his son and daughter carried on the business, but, more cautious than the old man, managed to keep clear of the law, and added considerably to their income by lending money at fabulous rates.

After a few years together, brother and sister accused each other—probably with cause—of robbing the till, whereupon they gave up the shop, and Sally started a servants' registry office. Robert committed forgery, was sentenced to three years' imprisonment, and after the expiration of his time left the country. Sally also graced the dock in connection with a case of swindling, but was acquitted, and for a long while nothing was heard of her.

One morning a card was brought in to me bearing the name of Madame de Saint-Florent. It was Sally; and if her English godfather had been there he would have indulged in another laugh, for above her dowdy dress she wore a costly sable cape and a hat set rakishly on one side.

"I have something to tell you, M. Goron," she began in her gruff voice; "Robert is back."

"Your brother?"

She nodded.

"I am sorry to hear it," I said. "I have quite enough criminals on my hands, and could well have dispensed with him. But why did you come to tell me that?"

"Because I am afraid of him. He looked so shabby and hungry that I bought him a rig-out and allowed him to take his meals with me. The other day I came home unexpectedly and found him busy with the lock of the cupboard in my bedroom. I forbade him to come to the house again, and then he threatened me, and became so menacing that I gave him money to get rid of him. He will murder me one of these days."

"If Robert threatens you," I replied, "You have only to go to the police commissary in your district; he will take the matter up."

"It's no use of my going there, M. Goron. I do not bear the best of reputations."

"That you do not."

"I know it, sir. And, therefore, the police commissary will not trouble about me; nor would Robert mind him much. But the very mention of your name frightens my brother, and were you but to say a word to him it would bring him to his senses. Please do this for me, M. Goron."

I told her that this affair did not concern me in any way. Sally, however, left me no peace. She said her life was in danger; and she begged so hard that I at last promised to see her brother, and, to use her own words, "frighten him to death."

"I shall be away from Paris for a week," I said, "so you had better send me Robert in ten or twelve days."

On my return from Cherbourg my secretary informed me that Robert had called.

"He has not grown handsomer," laughed my assistant. "I gave him a good talking to, and he promised to leave Sally alone in the future, although he asserts that all she told you about his threatening her was a pack of lies."

"Why did he not wait for my return?" I asked.

"I reckon, sir, he was too frightened of you, and preferred me to deal with him."

Several months elapsed, when the news reached me that a M. F— had been found dead in a hotel in the Rue Lafayette. He was a widower, highly respected, and a member of two fashionable clubs. The postmortem showed he had died from poisoning, and everything pointed to a suicide, although neither his married daughter, his valet or cook could assign any reason for the act.

At the hotel I learned that M. F— had come there the previous evening at about ten o'clock, and had paid for

his room in advance. He had not locked his door, and was found the next morning lying fully dressed on the bed. The most careful examination of his papers failed to throw any light on the affair, and at the official inquest a verdict of suicide was returned.

It transpired that M. F— had withdrawn large amounts from his bank, no trace of which could be found. He neither speculated nor gambled, and he always noted down every cent he spent. Yet of the hundred thousand francs that had disappeared no record could be found. What had become of the cash? His heirs moved heaven and earth to find it, but in vain.

Although I concurred in the verdict of suicide, I was not satisfied, for I scented blackmailers. Those who, like me, have lived in an atmosphere of crime, will know the mischief wrought by these scoundrels.

In the pantomime of life, wherein criminals play such an important role, swindlers and sharpers often impersonate the "funny man." But the blackmailer is the "villain," the traitor who stabs his victims in the back, and rarely leaves a trace of his deadly work.

When a few days after M. F—'s funeral I called on his daughter and expressed my view, she indignantly declared that there could be nothing hidden in her father's life—a man whose reputation had been above suspicion. Her husband was of the same opinion. I knew they were speaking the truth, and I also knew that I could not hope for any help from them.

After an anxious search I at last made an important discovery. M. F— had engaged himself to a Baronne de V— in Tours, and had concealed this fact from his daughter and his friends. Deeply in love with Madame de V—, he had pressed her hard to fix their wedding for an early date, whereupon it was arranged that it was to have taken place toward the end of June. In less than a fortnight, however, he had suddenly become despondent, and, to the lady's surprise, had informed her that the wedding had to be postponed.

All this was related to me by Madame de V—, who was eager to assist me in sifting the matter. As I rose to take my leave she said:

"The last time my poor friend was here he left his cigarette-case behind, and inside I found this scrap of paper. It is in his handwriting, and the notes in pencil refer to a sale of a small estate he owned. I am afraid you will not find it very useful."

I examined the leaflet with care.

"Madame," I replied, "this scrap discloses four distinct facts, which, pieced together, may supply a valuable clue."

"What facts?"

"The address printed at the top of the page is that of a shady cafe in the Boulevard Rochechouart. And did you notice the curious characters at the back?"

"Yes, I did. I fancied they were Hebrew letters."

"No, they are Arabic. From all this I deduce: First, that your friend, who could have gone to such a place only under compulsion, did not meet the people he had come to see; second, that, having had to wait for them, he whittled away the time by scribbling these notes on a piece of letter-paper he found lying on the table; third, that he grew impatient and restless, for the characters at the back are jotted down nervously and lack the firmness of the other writing; fourth, that, as Arabic is not a language usually taught at college, it is more than probable that M. F— spent some time in our African colonies."

"Why, yes," Madame de V— exclaimed. "I remember he once described to me a scene he witnessed in Oran."

"That simplifies matters," I rejoined, "and I can now set to work."

It is not always easy to dive into a dead man's past. The moment the human machinery has been brought to a standstill everything that once gravitated around him seems to disappear. He is forgotten by friends, and detractors who persecuted him to his last breath have potent reasons never to mention his name.

But the threads supplied to me by that note would, I expected, put me on the right course, and I felt I could not have any peace as long as the miscreants responsible for M. F—'s death went about unchallenged.

The statement made to me by M. F—'s daughter that her father's reputation was above suspicion was undoubtedly true as far as Paris was concerned. If, therefore, there was a blot in the man's life I had to look for it elsewhere, and Oran at once presented itself to my mind.

I made discreet inquiries, and learned that some twelve years ago M. F—, while in Oran, had allowed himself to be foolishly implicated in a scandal, which, thanks to powerful protection, had been hushed up.

While I was trying to clear up that side of the problem, it was also essential that I should know something of the people who frequented the cafe in the Boulevard Rochechouart,

and I selected as my observatory a rival establishment a few doors off, whence I could watch those passing in and out.

I knew I could rely on my memory, and on the first day recognized many who in various ways had passed through my hands. Not a few of them had anything but clean records, but they were either book-makers, sharpers, or tricky horse-dealers, frequenters of the race-course, whose specialty lay in a different direction.

One evening, half an hour after I had reached my post of observation, I saw a clean-shaven man walk up and take his seat outside. After a while he tapped at the window for a waiter, who replied to a question put to him, whereupon the man flew into a rage and, talking rapidly, pulled once or twice the lobe of his left ear.

I looked at him in surprise. Many years ago I had known a fellow who, when his temper was roused, indulged in that curious habit. He was nicknamed the "Patriarch," because of his long beard; but he was reported to have died in the Toulon hospital. His name was Bachelet, and he had been a notorious blackmailer.

I cautiously got close to him, and then do doubt was possible. It was the "Patriarch," minus his beard and with his hair dyed black. Even had I not seen him pull his ear I should have known him by his eyes.

He was a cunning rascal, who to save his skin would not scruple to turn on his accomplices, which accounted for his having once received an ugly knife-thrust. Although he declared at the time he did not know his assailant, I suspected he had good reason to conceal the truth.

While I was watching him a man in a dirty blouse and torn cap, his face begrimed with dirt, the type of the Paris loafer, slouched past me and gave me a hardly perceptible nod. I had trouble to keep from laughing;

"Toward ten o'clock he went, jumped on a bus, changed twice, and when near the Boulevard Ney got down and walked toward the Rue Rousseau. It is a dark street, or I could not have followed him. At the end of the street, where a house is being built, I saw him climb over the pallings, looking for something or somebody. He remained there for two hours, and then returned home the way he came.

"Yesterday he rose late, spent the greater part of the afternoon in the cafe where you pointed him out to me; and, the moment darkness had set in again, took up his position behind the pallings in the Rue Rousseau.

"I was beginning to wonder what it all meant, when I saw a woman walk down the street at a brisk pace. She was about a couple of yards from the place where I was hiding. At that moment Latouche rushed up to her, and, seizing her roughly by both arms, called out: 'I've caught you at last, you beauty.' But with a quick movement she shook him off, and turned on him like a tigress. At the same time her veil fell off and I recognized—whom do you think?—Sally, the—"

"I know. Go on with your story."

"Bachelet!" she shrieked. "I'll—"

"But the fellow did not let her continue. 'Don't howl like that, you demon,' he hissed; 'only tell me where your brother is. You know how he swindled me, the despicable hound. Where is he?'"

"I swear I know nothing about him," she cried. "But if ever you dare again lay your dirty fingers on me, I'll bowl the name of Bachelet a little louder than I did tonight!" And she strutted away. As I wanted to report to you, I sent word to Gerard to take my place and keep the fellow under observation. Do you want me to watch him further?"

"No, Darlaud," I said. "But tomorrow you must tell him I want to see

to ask protection against her brother because he threatened her life; but I know better, it's all blarney. They meet at her house, and I have seen Robert go there repeatedly late at night and not come out again. Robert did me a bad turn. I meant to be even with him, and kept my eye on the pair. No easy matter, for they are never seen together. I found out he had dealings with a gentleman who seemed to stand in terror of him, and I traced this gentleman to his address in the Rue de Provence. His name, I discovered, was M. F—, and when I heard he committed suicide I connected Robert with the affair. I ought to say Robert and his sister; for they work together, although the sister always manages to keep in the background."

"I compliment you on your detective skill," I said; "but how is it you bring me this information after so many weeks have elapsed?"

"Because Robert suddenly disappeared, and I waited for his return before calling on you. Robert has been blackmailing that poor M. F—, and, under the threat of disclosing something that occurred at Oran, succeeded in extracting a lot of money from his victim."

"How do you know this?" I asked.

"I heard it from one of Robert's pals, whom he cheated, like he does everybody."

"Like he cheated you, too, in that business, I suppose?"

He started from his chair.

"No, M. Goron," he cried, "I had nothing to do with this affair, or I would not be here to tell you about it."

And the old rascal bowed himself out of the room.

It is not to the credit of mankind that nine-tenths of the information supplied to the police is prompted by revenge; Bachelet, of course, had participated in the blackmailing affair,

minutes elapsed and I was wondering what had become of the individual. A figure then suddenly emerged from a heap of stones opposite me, and like lightning disappeared into the house. I had recognized Robert, but unfortunately he had been too quick for me.

"Having whistled softly, Fabre crept up from his hiding-place, and we conferred as to the best course to take. We remained on guard all night, and this morning at daybreak knocked at the door. After a quarter of an hour it was opened by the woman. She looked pale, and trembled from head to foot."

"Who are you?" she asked.

"When we told her we wanted to see Robert, she screamed: 'He is not here! I haven't seen him for ever so long. Go away, the lot of you. I have been taken ill during the night. You'd better send for a doctor.'"

"And she crept up to her room."

"We then searched the house from top to bottom, but the fellow had disappeared. We are certain he is hidden somewhere. But where? Fabre thinks there must be a subterranean passage leading into the fields beyond, and I am inclined to think so too. That funny-looking well ought to be examined. I left the other men there. We want your help, sir."

I jumped into a cab with my secretary, and drove straight to Sally's house. Inspector Berard was outside, and informed me that the woman was really ill, and that some one had gone to fetch medical help.

I made a thorough investigation of the place, my men following my movement with curiosity. I went down the dried-up well, and saw that the old stones, firmly cemented together, had not been moved for a century. I tapped all the floors and walls, but found no trace of any secret passage.

"Any clue, sir?" asked Berard.

"Yes. Robert has been caught in his own trap, and cannot get away. And now I shall pay a visit to Sally."

The room I entered was in a terribly untidy state. The floor, chairs, and tables were littered with articles of the most heterogeneous description, and a strong smell of spirits pervaded the place. Sally was sitting up in bed, her head propped up with pillows. When she saw me, she shook her fist at me and said in an angry tone:

"What do you want? Don't bother me about Robert. He is gone away, thank heaven! and, what's more, I don't want him back. And now leave me alone. I'm ill."

"I am sorry to disturb you," I said, "but I bring you news from your brother. He is here. Quite close to us."

Sally bent forward, clenching an old handkerchief with which she had wiped her forehead.

"Where do you say he is?" she gasped.

"He is lying in this bed, looking me straight in the face."

"You are mad. Do you think I am Robert?"

"Oh, no. I always know a lady when I see her. I should be sorry to doubt your sex. But, although you are Mlle. Hortense Perrichon, you also are your own brother, or, rather, you have impersonated him. Is that clear?"

A knock fell on the door. It was the doctor, and I withdrew to the garden, after having asked him to signal to me the moment he had done with the woman.

My secretary was pacing the garden up and down.

"You allowed yourself to be nicely bluffed," I said to him. "Yes," I continued, "this woman bluffed you, and others as well. In the annals of crime it certainly is a record case. Her brother did not return to this country, and, I dare say, died years ago. Sally performed a stroke of genius, coming to my office claiming my protection against him. With her short hair and wonderful likeness to him, she put on man's clothes, and then waited until I was away from Paris before calling at the office and introducing herself to you as Robert. You never thought that the gentleman who came to see you was Sally!"

"Once Robert's existence was established, Sally knew she could with perfect safety carry out nefarious schemes, and change her sex the moment things became threatening. It was she who blackmailed that unfortunate M. F—."

"When Berard came to me this morning and related that wonderful story of Robert's ghostly appearance, I began to have an inkling of the truth. I do not believe in secret passages nor in miracles."

The doctor here called me and said that the woman was seriously ill, and I ordered her immediate removal to the Infirmary of the Depot X. (the Central Police Station).

Before going away she beckoned to me and whispered in my ear:

"The game is up. You found me out. Good-by."

They were the last words I heard her speak.

After she had gone I ransacked her room, and from the most impossible hiding-places brought to light securities, money, jewelry, men's clothes of every description. Among her correspondence I found several letters of M. F—; also a document relative to the death of Robert, three years before.

Sally had been struck down with enteric fever. When she recovered, the doctors declared that her mind was affected and that she could not be put on her trial. She was transferred to the St. Anne's Asylum, where she died hopelessly insane.

Curiously enough, there are still people who, having known Sally, refuse to believe she alone carried out such a bold scheme. They are convinced that Robert was not a myth at the time, and that he and his sister had been plotting together.



WHEN SHE SAW ME, SHE SHOOK HER FIST AT ME

for, despite his disguise, I recognized Darlaud, one of my men.

Poor Darlaud! In his constant hunt after criminals of the lowest order he rarely had time to appear in respectable clothes. It was even said that on his sister's wedding-day he had not found a minute to put on a clean suit, and that when he attempted to enter the church the beadle wanted to give him into custody. I walked a little way in front of him and then turned around.

"Do you see that man outside the cafe over yonder?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Do not lose sight of him, and report his movements to me."

On the afternoon of the third day Darlaud turned up.

"I scent a mystery, sir," he began.

"So do I," I replied; "but possibly the solution of the mystery that puzzles you may prove the solution of the one I am trying to work out."

"Well, sir," he continued, "I never lost sight of my man; I had to go carefully to work, for he is terribly wide-awake. He made me trot. He dined at a wine-shop in the Rue Louis-Blanc, then strolled toward the Rue Belleville and entered an hotel kept by a man called Coulon. A minute later I saw him at one of the windows in his shirt-sleeves, so I gathered he lived there. I at once asked for a room for myself, and managed to secure one two doors from our friend. His name, I discovered, is Charles Latouche, or, rather, that is how he entered in the hotel books."

him on a personal matter, and you will bring him here. Address him, of course, as Latouche."

The next morning at eleven he was shown in. His face was thin and crafty, and he peered at me with curiosity and cunning expressed in his puckered eyes.

"You are Latouche?" I began.

"Yes, sir—Charles Latouche."

"I have an interesting communication to make to you. A man has just died, leaving all his estate to a certain Charles Latouche; and I have been asked to hunt for this fortunate heir. Have you any papers to prove your identity in case you are that lucky man?"

He stared at me in bewilderment, and his hand slowly crept up to his left ear.

"Don't do that," I laughed, "or you will make me think of some one who had the same curious knack. His name was Bachelet."

He turned livid. But I saw it was with rage and not from fear.

"When you began about that legacy," he said, "I knew you were only making fun of me. Yes, I am Bachelet; and I changed my name because of my past life. If you had not sent for me, I would have come to see you, for I have something to say to you. It refers to Hortense and Robert Perrichon, sister and brother, twins, a queer couple, awfully alike. You know them?"

"Yes."

"They are a pair of scoundrels. The woman spread the story that she had

and had evidently been defrauded by his confederate. With his usual caution, however, he had kept on the safe side, and could, therefore, risk denouncing him."

I ordered Inspector Berard to arrest Robert, and, as we had not yet discovered his whereabouts to watch Sally's house, where he was supposed to go every night.

Sally lived near the Porte Clignancourt, on the outskirts of the city, a forlorn spot facing the fortifications. It was a dismal building situated in what had once been a garden, but had become a wilderness. A thick, high hedge ran along the front of the house, which stood some fifty yards away from the road; a wall and a ditch protected it at the back. In the garden was a well, walled in with massive stone. Several windows at the back of the dwelling were broken and blocked with wooden boards. Altogether, it was a gloomy place that would have lent itself admirably for a sensational scene in a melodrama.

On the morning of the fifth day I found Inspector Berard sitting in my office looking very uncomfortable.

"What's amiss?" I asked.

"Everything," he replied. "Fabre and I watched the premises very closely and saw the woman go out several times. But never a sign of Robert. Last night at ten Fabre was at the back and I in front of the house, when a cab drove up, stopped about a hundred yards from the place, and some one alighted, whom, in the darkness, I could not see. Twenty